

THE PRUDE

A Warning to Young Ladies in general, and Engaged Ones in particular

BY GEORGE AUGUSTUS SALA

A BETTER title than "The Prude" for this little anecdote might perhaps be, "Ladies, Beware!" for it contains a most awful warning to the girls of every period. But I have some few and scattered prejudices left—old and silly ones, I daresay—touching honesty in literary matters; and "Ladies, Beware!" happens to be the title of a very amusing farce, first produced in London at the Princess's, and recently revived at the Olympic. I am quite certain on this point, because I knew the French gentleman who wrote the original vaudeville, and the English gentleman who translated it from the French in a back-room of the Royal Princess's Theatre as aforesaid, and because I made a fair copy of the piece myself, and transcribed all the parts for the actors and actresses who were to perform in it, in the selfsame back-room in Castle-street-east, Oxford-street, two-and-twenty years ago.

"Ladies, Beware!" is laden with a most pregnant moral. It hinges on the escapade of a young married lady, who, having jumped out of a first-floor window in order to annoy her husband, after some trifling matrimonial dispute, is ultimately fain—after the well-known example of the gentleman in the nursery rhyme, who, deeming himself "so wondrous wise," jumped into a quickset hedge and scratched out both his eyes, and then, to regain possession of those organs of vision, jumped back again—to return to her happy home by the way she had come: to wit, the window. The moral I shall strive to point will be as weighty; only it is my duty to warn you, in the outset, that the story of "The Prude" does not end happily; whereas the curtain falls on "Ladies, Beware!" with one-half the *dramatis personæ* embracing the other half: thus offering pleasant prospects of their living happy ever afterwards.

So I take "The Prude" for my title; but not, I confess, without some inward misgivings as to its fitness. What, after all, is a Prude? The Empress Maria Theresa, if we are to trust Cagliostro's *Memoirs*, was a *béguéule*; but the singular police regulations she framed to compel her subjects to be virtuous seem to have resulted in making Vienna what it is now,—the most dissolute capital in Europe. You very seldom see a good prude in a play or in a novel: the author generally imagines that he has portrayed prudery when he has drawn some outrageous caricature of a fastidious old maid; but, as I understand this peculiar

type of femininity, it is possible to be a prude and pretty, to be a prude and in love, to be a prude and married. Alexander Dumas, in his *Règne de Louis Quatorze*, tells a story of a Madame de Bautru who was such a prude, young, handsome, and a matron.

Are there any prudes in England at this epoch? I doubt, I gravely doubt it much. The decline of prudery in this country dates from the day when ladies allowed men to smoke in their presence, to talk slang and stable (they are sometimes slangy and stably in conversation themselves), and to admit the existence of such creatures as "pretty horsebreakers." Your prude of the old school would never have dreamed of permitting men to do anything of this kind. Cheap newspapers, the Court for Divorce and Matrimonial Causes, the frequency of foreign travel, with the confessions of one's brothers of Sunday-evening visits to Mabilly and the Porte St. Martin during the vogue of such *décolleté* pieces as *La Biche au Bois*, may all have had something to do with the decline of that virtuous squeamishness which once led English ladies to avert their eyes from the statues in the sculpture-gallery of the British Museum, to banish casts of Danneker's Ariadne and Kiss's Amazon from their drawing-rooms, and to speak of the capital of Holland as "Amster-ahem!" It has become a very free-and-easy country indeed, this England. Schneiderism in high places. *Cartes-de-visite* of "Skittles," and Mabel Gray in the *cancan*, elbowing Father Ignatius and the Rev. Mr. Spurgeon in the fancy stationers', and the habits and humours of Anonyma and Abomina openly discussed at genteel dinner-tables: O, "shocking!" as the French journalists exclaim whenever they strive to give a notion of English ideas of decorum.

But has moral fastidiousness taken refuge in the United States? Is America, at least, still the chosen home of prudes and prudery? We all remember the droll stories current about twenty years since as to the exquisite sensitiveness, on certain topics, of the American ladies. How one refused to walk through a potato-field because the potatoes had "eyes;" how another caused the legs of her pianoforte to be swathed in frilled trousers; how the bird sacred to Æsculapius was delicately termed a "rooster," and the coxswain of a boat a "rooster-swain," and the legs of humanity the "limbs," and the breast of a turkey the "bosom." Many of these nasty niceties came out of Boston, the paradise of whimsical conceits; many more were the invention of the wags of American journalism. But every young American lady nowadays, whose papa has the means, goes to Europe. She sees the Venus de' Medicis and the Apollo Belvedere, and her ideas of sculpture differ very widely from those of the precise lady who invited Mrs. Trollope to enter the museum of statuary at Philadelphia "while the gentlemen were not looking." Nay, the modern Yankee girl is often herself a sculptress, and, *teste* Miss Hatty Hosmer, a most admirable one. She has learnt "a thing or two" these late years, this formerly shrinking and trembling young Columbia. She has seen Schneider; she has read

Madame Bovary. She calls things by their names. She is "posted up," as her male relatives would say.

Thirty years, however, is a long period. In America it is a whole age. Thirty years ago there were real prudes in America, and perhaps one of the most straitlaced of the severe sisterhood ever known in ancient or modern times was Miss Cornelia Perfitt, of Canal-street, New York.

Canal-street is now a locality as entirely given up to retail commerce—haberdashery at the top, shipchandlery at the bottom—as our Holborn; but in 1838 many substantial merchants and bankers, whose families were not too proud to occupy the upper floors as their residence, had their offices there. Among the last-named class there were few firms more substantial, or enjoying higher a repute, than that of Perfitt, Parfitt, and Peake.

Parfitt, a wealthy bachelor, boarded at the Astor House; Peake, a little man with a large family—it was fashionable to have large families in those days—had a beautiful villa at Staten Island. It was old General Perfitt who kept house above the offices in Canal-street. He had been for many years a widower, and Cornelia was his only child. The comparative isolation in which the young lady had been reared had perhaps something to do with the astounding amount of prudery which at the age of sixteen her character began to exhibit. She had never been sent to school, else the common school-life of America, where boys and girls (without the slightest harm accruing to either sex) are often educated together, might have somewhat mollified the sternness of her views on propriety. An ancient, angular, and acidulated aunt from the State of Vermont had carefully tutored her in all that, thirty years since, it was considered proper for an American maiden to learn. Thus she knew by heart the General Catechism of the Presbyterian Church, which, as regards lengthiness, is, as compared with the Catechism of the Church of England, as the bill at three months you have just accepted is to the lawyer's bill of costs you will find tacked to the bill if you don't take it up when due. She was also sedulously instructed in ancient history, in so much of modern history as related to the tyranny of George the Third, the surrender of the British at Saratoga, their discomfiture at Bunker's-hill, their defeat at New Orleans, their vandalism at Washington, and their humiliation when compelled to acknowledge the independence of the United States and the immortality of General Washington. She was likewise taught geography and the use of the globes; but it is to be feared that Cornelia didn't know the name of the capital of Moldavia, and would have been puzzled to tell where Lorraine or the Palatinate or the Frioul was situated. General Perfitt, her papa, having insisted that some modern accomplishments should supplement his daughter's theological and historical studies, Miss Lucretia Tittytitt, the aunt from Vermont aforesaid, had reluctantly engaged the services of a French emigrant

who taught French and dancing, and a German who taught drawing. As the ostensible Gaul really hailed from Strasburg in Alsace, pronounced *plaisir* "blaisir," and *bonté* "ponté," and had about as much notion of dancing as a hippopotamus, and as the Teuton's graphic skill was of the nature of that internal consciousness out of which his celebrated compatriot evolved the camel, Miss Perfitt did not precisely become a *Mademoiselle de Sévigné* or a *Rosa Bonheur* under the tuition of these instructors from Europe; nor were the music-lessons given her by one Mrs. Tabitha Spinnychords quite of the school of Thalberg or Kalkbrenner. Miss Spinnychords, indeed, was retained as music-mistress to Cornelia, not so much because she knew anything about music as because she was a person of the most exalted moral propriety, and had had a grand-uncle by the mother's side who was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

It was in this manner, then, that the young ideas of Cornelia Perfitt were taught to shoot. A young American damsel of the existing era would have regarded the sum of her acquirements, I am afraid, with the profoundest contempt. Abating theology, she knew nothing of the "ologies." The "fairy-tales of science" had been prohibited to her as unscriptural, as those of the nursery had been forbidden as vain and frivolous. She knew no more of Siluria or the old Red Sandstone than she did of Bluebeard or Jack the Giant-killer. She had a vague impression that natural philosophy was somehow connected with Deism, and that when the Enemy of Mankind had nothing to do—which very rarely happened—he employed his leisure in writing three-volume novels, or in going to the play. The literature of fiction and the entertainments of the theatre she had been taught from her earliest youth to regard as the acme of abominable wickedness. Some things, however, she did know which modern young ladies are not very conversant with. She wrote a capital hand, and could keep a household expense-book with the utmost accuracy. She could make excellent apple-jack, strawberry short-cakes, and cranberry tarts. She was versed in all the mysteries of the preparation of preserved quinces and brandy-peaches. As to her manners, they were, from her Aunt Lucretia's point of view, perfect; and that perfection had been attained by constant counsel, by incessant warnings and reprimands of the order known as "nagging," and by the occasional application of a hickory switch. Miss Cornelia Perfitt would no more have dreamt, when seated, of touching the back of her chair with her shoulder-blades than of flying. To sit bolt-upright was one of the chief articles in the Tittytitt code. When Miss Perfitt's hands were not holding a book, or a pen, or a needle, they were demurely folded before her. When you looked at her, she immediately cast down her eyes. If you said it was a fine day, she blushed; if you mentioned that Miss Sukey was about to be married, she averted her head; if you ventured to repeat a droll anecdote in her presence, she either subsided into an icy silence, or left the

room: and you were never asked again to dine in Canal-street. Her papa the General, and her aunt from Vermont, watched with infinite joy and contentment this agreeable development of the young lady's mind and manners.

"She'll be another Mehetabel Wesley," the exemplary Miss Tittytitt used in grim exultation to predict.

"She's fit to be married to the President of the National Bank," cried in response the General.

"Lawful sakes, brother!" Miss Lucretia would observe, "the man's married already, and has half-a-dozen children."

There were other banks, however, with presidents who at least had sons who might prove eligible bridegrooms for the peerless damsel of Canal-street. I may just whisper to you that she was an heiress, and exceedingly beautiful—a tall, slim blonde, with blue eyes and a profusion of auburn hair. Many swains, and wealthy swains too, had come sighing to Canal-street; but they had been invariably sent away again, quite as much at the instigation of Cornelia herself as for any disfavour in which they were held by the General or by Miss Tittytitt. There was always something the matter with their morals or their manners—judged from the Perfitt-Tittytitt standard. One was vehemently suspected of smoking, and to another had been directly brought home the guilt of chewing. The ideas of a third on the subject of the ages of the Patriarchs were not deemed orthodox; and a fourth owed his dismissal to the avowal he was incautious enough to make that "Jonah never swallowed that whale." "Irreverence aggravated by ignorance," muttered Miss Tittytitt as she nodded the offender to the door. Young men generally broke down in Canal-street after the third or fourth visit. Then middle-aged swains tried the heiress, but with no greater success than their more youthful competitors. Old men—wealthy widowers, affluent bachelors of irreproachable morals—made desperate attempts to storm Cornelia's heart, but in vain. There is no knowing how long that fair citadel might have held out, but that, as Fate would have it—and Fate will beat even the Tittytitt code in the long-run—the girl managed to fall over head and ears in love with Sam Bewley.

And the strangest part of the affair was, that neither the morals nor the manners of Mr. Samuel Bewley would bear close inspection. I am afraid, in fact, that they would not bear any inspection at all. Sad stories were brought to Miss Tittytitt's ears, and by her communicated to her niece, of the restless, and indeed the rakish, life led by Sam Bewley. The disappointed suitors, it need scarcely be hinted, were in most cases the informants as to Mr. Bewley's misdeeds. Nor, it is to be feared, were the calumnies uttered respecting him devoid of some foundation in fact. Sam was a very sad dog indeed. He smoked many more cigars than were good for him. He drank champagne; and to drink champagne in the States thirty years since was at once to earn

the evil repute of a Lovelace or a Lauzun. He gave oyster-suppers; he kept a trotting-wagon; it was notorious that he was addicted to faro, Van John, and unlimited loo; and it was currently reported that he was continually behind the scenes of the Park Theatre, and was on much too familiar terms with the pretty actresses there. The only pleas in extenuation which Sam could advance were to the effect that he was scarcely twenty-two, that he was very handsome, and that his father, the Hon. Samuel Bewley, member of the House of Representatives in Congress, and ironmaster of Pittsburg, in the State of Pennsylvania, was worth seven hundred thousand dollars.

"Well, he'll sow his wild-oats," the General observed indulgently.

"Barring a bit of wildness, he's just the man for my Corney."

"If he *could* be weaned from the paths of profligacy and vice, and led into those of virtue and decorum," added Miss Tittytitt, "less eligible partners might perhaps be found for our beloved Cornelia. He would be just the husband for her."

"I will reform him," said the beauteous Cornelia. She did not say that Sam Bewley was just the husband for her, but she may have thought so. Young ladies think a great many things to which they discreetly refrain from giving articulate utterance.

It chanced that about this time some famous English comedian was announced to appear in a starring engagement at the Park Theatre. It may have been Buckstone, it may have been the Keeleys; but at all events the new arrival was a celebrity and a late importation from Europe, and it became the fashion to witness his performance. The Perfitt family, as a rule, set their faces against the stage; but in this case (the comedian being a person of the strictest moral character, and all New York flocking to the Park to see him) Miss Lucretia Tittytitt consented for once in a way to waive her prejudices against the profane and immoral exhibitions known as stage-plays, and the General paid a round sum in dollars for a private box at the Park. The performance of the celebrated comedian was to be followed by a ballet; but it was unanimously agreed in the Canal-street council that the box should be vacated immediately after the European celebrity had concluded, and that the morals of Cordelia should not be contaminated by witnessing the unseemly gyrations of shameless dancing-girls in abbreviated skirts and pink hose. The night of performance arrived, and Miss Perfitt and her aunt from Vermont, sitting bolt-upright as usual, were visible in the front of the box. The General occupied a back seat and went to sleep quite comfortably. Mr. Sam Bewley was to join the party in the course of the evening; but he had pleaded a business engagement, which, as he said, would detain him until half-past eight o'clock.

The performance duly commenced at seven; and by nine o'clock the piece, in which the celebrated comedian convulsed as usual his audience, had terminated. But Mr. Samuel Bewley had failed, much to the indignation of Miss Tittytitt, and more to the disappointment

of Cornelia, to make his appearance. They waited in the box for some minutes after the comedy was over, hoping that the truant would arrive; but as the overture to the ballet had begun and no Sam Bewley was in sight, Miss Lucretia was fain to wake up the General and insist on their departure. Otherwise, in their own despite, they might have been compelled to gaze upon the lost creatures and their legs.

Suddenly the music in the orchestra ceased, and after a brief interval began again in a livelier strain. *The curtain had risen, and the ballet was visible.* Involuntarily (of course) the two ladies, who had been occupied at the back of the box in the process of shawling and bonneting, turned their heads towards the stage. Miss Lucretia Titty-titt shuddered, and Cornelia uttered a scream. At the same time General Perfitt was heard to make the profane exclamation of "Zounds!" and simultaneously a mighty roar of laughter, mingled with hisses and catcalls, arose from the boxes, pit, and gallery of the Park Theatre.

Scream, shudder, profane exclamation, roar of laughter, hisses, and catcalls, were all due to one and the selfsame cause. This is what was manifest to the horrified eyes of Cornelia and her aunt, and to about two thousand pairs of eyes besides; this is what was plainly, shamelessly, apparent on the stage of the Park Theatre: about twenty of the depraved creatures with legs were grouped on the stage in various immoral attitudes, forming the opening tableau of the ballet, and in their midst, in plain clothes, was Mr. Samuel Bewley! The wretched young man had evidently been flirting behind the scenes with the pernicious sirens of the ballet. He had disregarded commands to "clear;" he had not heard the prompter's whistle; the green-baize veil had been drawn up; and Samuel Bewley stood confessed to the world in general, and his affianced bride in particular, as a frequenter of the *coulisses*, as a desperate and abandoned profligate.

The next morning the dissolute Sam received a note written in Cornelia's symmetrical but uncompromising up-and-down hand. It was to this effect:

"After the dreadful, the shocking, the awful exhibition of last night, it is impossible that I could permit you to continue your visits to Canal-street. My family are furious; still, grieved and harrowed to the heart as I am by the glaring exhibition of your profligacy, I cannot bring myself, as perhaps I should do, to dismiss you irrevocably. But sincere and permanent repentance must be evinced before I can pardon you. Withdraw then, unhappy and misguided youth, from my presence for a season. Go to Europe, Samuel. Travel, observe, reflect, meditate. Study the masterpieces of ancient and modern art; wander among the ruins of the Mighty Past. Converse with wise and learned and virtuous men; and in two years, if amendment be possible, you will be another and a better man. Then you may return; and if you merit it, you may still find an affectionate welcome from

CORNELIA."

Sam Bewley, having sought and obtained his father's consent, proceeded, per Great Western steamship, to Europe, and abode there two whole years. Cornelia had forbidden him to correspond with her; but from time to time she heard from friends that Sam was in Italy, in Greece, in Spain, in Germany, or in France. She was sitting one evening, at the expiration of the time mentioned, in her drawing-room in Canal-street, when her mulatto maid entered, and her heart leapt up at the announcement that Mr. Samuel Bewley was in the adjacent apartment, and craved audience of her.

With trembling hands she took a lamp and entered the front drawing-room, and there was Sam Bewley, still very handsome, still very young, still very well-dressed, but very sunburnt, and, if truth must be told, somewhat excited by champagne, or some other vinous or spirituous stimulant.

"I've come back, miss," quoth Mr. Samuel Bewley in a thick voice. "It's me, mum. I've followed your advice; I've studied the masterpieces of ancient and modern art; I've wandered among the ruins of the Mighty Past; I've conversed with wise and learned and virtuous men; I've been away two years, and I've seen the world, and—I don't care that for you!"

And Mr. Samuel Bewley snapped his wicked fingers. Cornelia screamed and fainted.

Ladies, especially Prudes, beware!